Team Building as an Improved Approach to Teaching and Completing Tasks During Residency Rotations

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Let me introduce myself. I am a second year Psychiatry resident pursuing a second career, after earning a Neuroscience Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins Medical, and working as a research neuroscientist for 17 years. As I perused a feature article in my alumni magazine, "Stuck in Despair," I was not surprised to read, "A meta-analysis published in JAMA found that the prevalence of depression among resident physicians stands at about 29 percent more than three times the rate of the general public and is on the rise," (Hopkins Medicine, Spring/Summer 2016, @ Hopkinsmedicine.org). This article reported long working hours and stressful working environments contributed greatly to a rapid escalation of depression rates in medical residents during their first year, with little improvement during subsequent years. Thus, I would like to offer basic recommendations on how to improve the work environment for medical residents of all years, through a team building approach.

These basic recommendations work best, if they are initially implemented by you as Resident Team Leader. Other residents should soon follow your good example:

1. Treat all residents, including junior residents, with respect. Treating all others with respect engenders relief and confidence among resident team members, and allows your team to better integrate with diverse populations in the hospital. Many hospitals employ workers of different nationalities, age groups, experiences, religions, and personal preferences: residents should treat all with respect. Patients from all over the world travel to hospitals located at international hubs: they deserve effective means of communication. Residents should keep in mind if nurses are busy, medical technicians may volunteer to translate, if you ask them nicely. Also, Google translate offers two-way verbal translation in 105 languages, from Afrikaans to Zulu: this free app eliminates laborious typing. Afterwards, while typing copious notes in the Resident lounge, do not start conversations about politics or other divisive subjects. If someone else does, you should reply these topics are not acceptable to discuss at work.

2. Inform team members the collective work load will be divided fairly. Tell them, "We are a Team! Work will be dividing among us evenly." Reaction from team members should be very positive. As Team Leader, do not succumb to temptation to exploit the first-year residents, sub-interns, or medical students assigned to your team. If you are unfair, team members will resent you, work less efficiently, and repeat your unjust management style when they become Team Leaders next year. However, if you are perceived as fair in dividing labor, Team members will volunteer to take on more tasks and work longer hours, if necessary to finish the Team's work. You will soon see that everybody wins.

3. Praise team members, express appreciation for their good work, and use positive reinforcement to motivate team members. Positive reinforcement is extremely effective, in comparison to humiliating others, inciting fear, or inflicting punishment. Positive reinforcement boosts morale and efficiently increases productivity of your team.

4. For example, when a physician attending casually asks, "How are things going?" Loudly reply, "Everything is going great! I have a great team with [mention names]. I am very happy. We are doing a great job!" In response, the attending may be stunned, but recover and ask

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you to repeat the names of your team members. The attending will certainly remember your name. The highly positive response should reassure your attending and team members, who may be listening around the corner.

5. Ask for volunteers to perform various tasks. Team members know their strengths better than anyone else, and often volunteer to show off their strengths: this only benefits the team. For example, one team member says, "I am the Parent Whisperer." He volunteers to soothe family members of a patient served by the night team, when they show up during our day shift. Such volunteers enjoy spending 40 minutes talking to the patient's family, while other team members perform their usual work. Remember to praise volunteers for their efforts in front team members, or privately, if they prefer.

6. If a team member reports an emergency and cannot report to work, try to assess if the emergency is legitimate. If so, tell that team member, "We are here to help," and ask, "What can we do?" Make it clear, "Our team has your back. We will get the job done, don't worry. Call us with any updates." If you determine the team member has a non-emergency, ask that person to report to work. If the team member protests, ask for additional information, which could change your mind. Other team members will be reassured if the situation is handled fairly, but with compassion.

7. When hospital workers from another service call your team for help, show respect and respond promptly. Ask for advice on resolving the problem from members the other service, your service, ED physician, or physician attending, if appropriate. Do not issue orders, but ask for help in accomplishing necessary tasks efficiently. When a resolution is reached, before you leave the floor, provide a contact telephone number, to answer any further questions, or receive status updates. Showing respect in these ways will promote better cooperation among hospital teams, and benefit your team in the long run.

8. Use electronic apps, text messaging, or phone calls to communicate messages, according to each team member's preferences. Not everyone likes to read text messages. This especially applies to attending physicians – find out and use their preferences, for better communications and tasks completion.

9. Solicit criticism from your friends and non-friends at work. Toughen up, and listen to their constructive criticism. Both negative and positive criticism can help you improve flaws, and become a more effective team leader, and team member.

While these recommendations may seem basic, please try to practice them. After a very brief time, you should begin to hear comments such as, "This is the easiest rotation I ever had. I really enjoyed working with you, and our team!" One can only hope that team members will practice your new management style as Team Leaders next year.

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